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IN FORTNIGHTLY PARTS

The Ancestral Trail

AN EPIC STORY OF MYTHS, MAGIC AND MONSTERS

3 Baal the Giant Spider

Caught in a Sticky Web of Evil

Julek Heller

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From a story by Frank Graves

On the Third Day . . .

Beware the silken ways
By evil spinner spun.
Yellow orbs that hasten days
Destroy when serpent comes.
Some may perish, some feel pain
Tribulations not in vain
Three will tread these paths again
To save the precious one.

In the eerie silence that followed the high-pitched whistle, Richard looked up, almost afraid to open his eyes. Evil laughter snickered down at him and what he saw made him feel sick. Towering above the ruined thicket was a monstrous spider.

Normally he was not afraid of the things, but this was as far from the ordinary bathtub variety as you could get.

Two thick hairy legs held the thorn bushes apart while two baleful red eyes glowed down at Richard. The spider's mouth formed a cruel sickle, bordered by vicious-looking pincers. Then Richard noticed even more eyes on the spider's head, flickering alertly in every direction. As he gaped at the enormous creature, Merkat shouted urgently, "Get out of the thicket. I'll deal with the spider."

Richard did not move. He was still in a state of shock.

"Go now!" Merkat cried. "Orkan, get them away."

While Orkan hustled Richard and Melek back through the thorns, Merkat drew his sword. It swung upwards in a silver blur, travelling faster than the eye could follow. Left, right, it carved in a shining arc that sliced neatly through the spider's front legs. The creature reared up with a howl of agony and the bushes snapped back into position. In their midst, where seconds before had been an opening, there now hung two severed talons.

Surviving the odds

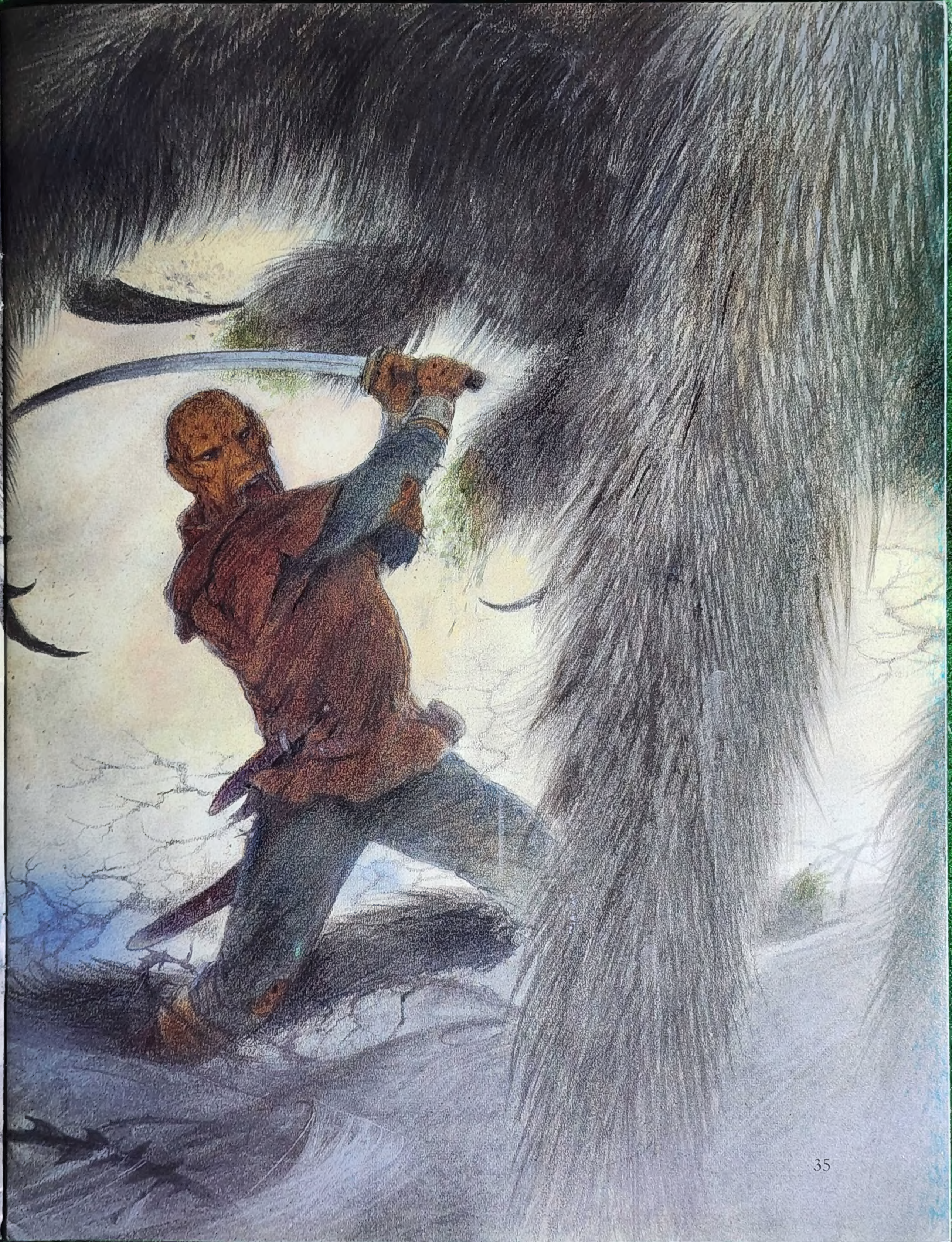
Merkat scrambled through the thicket to rejoin the others.

"That was Baal!" he panted. "I've run into him before. He's quick and he's deadly. I cut off two of his legs back there, but it won't slow him much. He'll soon grow more. Our only chance is the trees. If he catches us in a clearing we're dead. Follow me!"

Merkat darted lithely through the forest, twisting and turning in an intricate maze that would have thrown any pursuer off the scent. Several times he stopped to let the others catch up. But as soon as they arrived, puffing and panting, he was off again, a dappled spectre amidst the foliage.

Richard was amazed at Merkat's professionalism, and wondered how Golan's forces had managed to lose with born survivors like the leopardman on their side.

"I think we've gone far enough," Orkan suggested. Merkat stopped, and looked back. There was an instinctive rapport between the two soldiers.



"Yes, you're right," Merkat said. He listened, ears cocked for any sign of pursuit. There was nothing. Not even a bird call broke the silence. "We must get our bearings and find a way out of here," Merkat went on, cleaning his sword on a handful of leaves and sliding it back into its scabbard.

"Richard, take the Path Finder while I look at the next riddle," Melek said, taking the *Book of Prophecies* from his back. "It may help us."

"Beware the silken ways
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As Melek read aloud from the ancient pages, Richard swung the Path Finder until its point shimmered gold, and a deep green rose through almost to the handle. It was pointing straight at a huge clump of bushes. "That way," Richard said.

As they moved closer, Richard saw that the bushes were not normal vegetation. They were dry-looking, greyer and denser than their surroundings, and the branches were brittle and covered with thorns. Yet they bore luscious yellow berries that beckoned temptingly. The fruit looked so good that Richard reached out to pick one.

Deadly berries

"Don't touch those!" Merkat cried. "It's Gripewort, or Killer Sunrise some call it. The berries look good but if you eat them you're dead. They contain a metabolic poison which accelerates the ageing process beyond belief. Your whole life is crammed into less than half a minute. For a few seconds you have the strength and energy of 100 people, and then – burn-out. You shrivel and die. It's a horrible fate. I once lost ten men to Gripewort."

Drawing his sword once again, Merkat chopped at the bushes to clear a path for the others to follow. He worked at arm's length, careful to avoid the berries.

Cautiously, the three tiptoed after him, moving slowly as Merkat chopped at the branches. The bushes went deeper than they had expected and it took some time before they reached their end. After a while

the four stepped into a large clearing.

Richard's heart sank. The Path Finder had misled them. This was clearly Baal's territory – cobwebs festooned hideously from tree to tree. Here and there, large cocoons of silk testified to the fate of those who had been lured here before. Tears of frustration stung Richard's eyes, as he heard Golan's voice murmuring a warning over the faint rustle of leaves.

Cocoon coffin

"Baal must have these traps dotted all over the forest, just waiting for a victim," Merkat exclaimed. He walked up to one of the cocoons and slit it open with his sword. A wizened figure, hands held defensively before its face, crumbled out to the ground. The dry snap of bones as

they hit the ground drew Merkat's attention. Looking down he saw a small, intricately carved badge. He picked it up.

"'The Mighty Muldoon," Merkat exclaimed, recognizing the shiny object. "He was a great warrior. A landsman, wrapped in tartan with the wildest, reddest beard you've ever seen. This badge was handed down over generations and was meant to have magic powers. He told me what they were one night, but I was so tired I couldn't remember a word he said." Merkat tossed the badge to Richard. "You may as well have this – though it didn't do much for Muldoon."

Baal attacks

Richard pinned the gold emblem to his tunic. It was worn with age but he could still decipher some strange script round its rim. He was about to thank Merkat when there came the same dreadful whistling he had heard while hiding in the thorns. Then there was a hurried trampling noise and Baal surged into the clearing.

"This time, measly creatures," Baal wheezed triumphantly, "you won't get away."

For the second time that day, Richard was transfixed by the spider that loomed over him. Its mouth seemed crueller now, its pincers snapping more viciously. In the red eyes he caught an unpleasant, gloating expression.

"Back into the bushes!" Merkat shouted, plunging swiftly into the opening he had carved. The others tried to follow but it was too late.

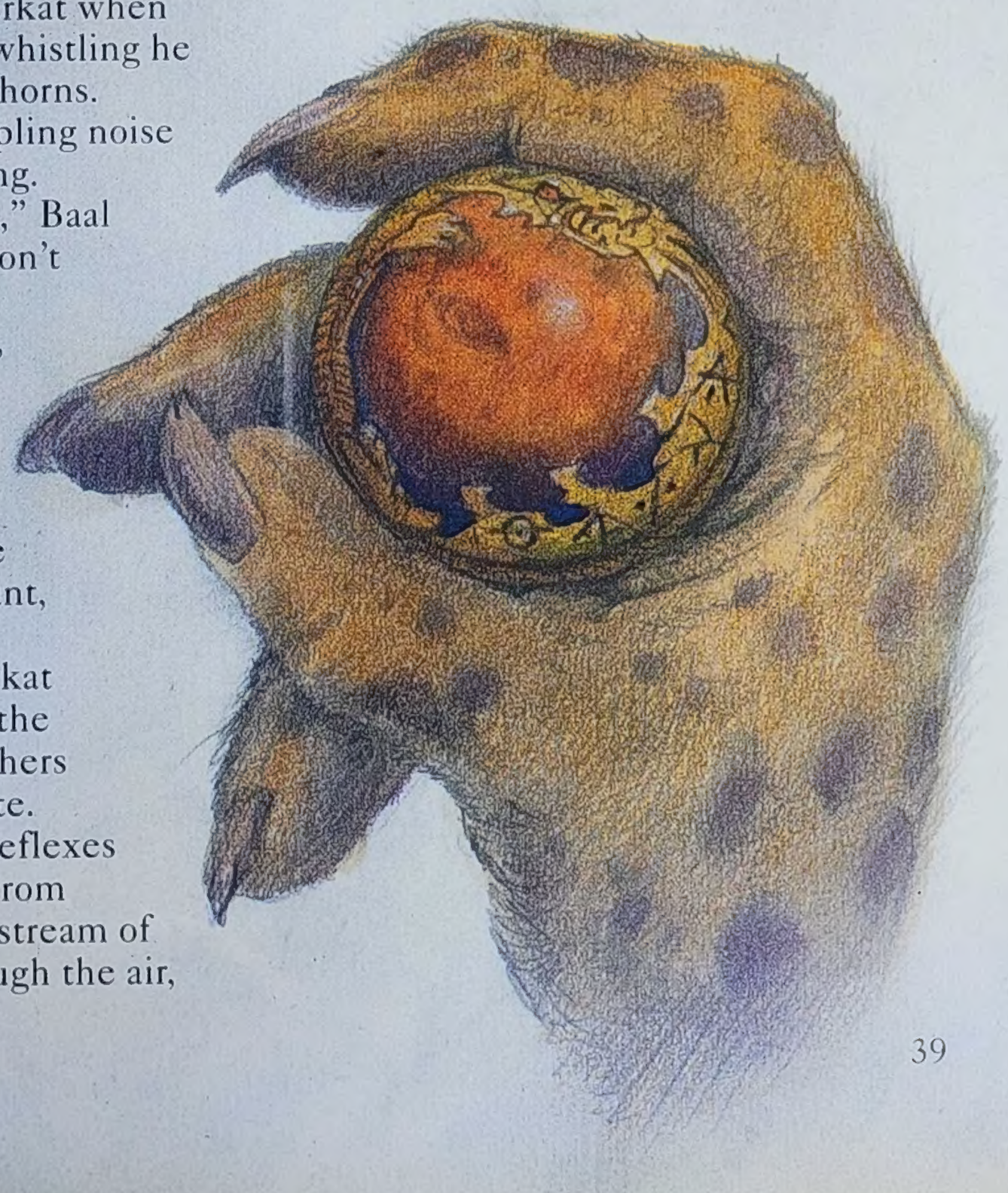
Lacking Merkat's lightning reflexes the three were easily caught. From beneath Baal's body spooled a stream of thin, sticky silk. It lanced through the air, wrapping all three in its clinging embrace. As they struggled to get free, yet more of the stuff shot out to envelop them.

"Help!" Melek cried as the glutinous strands tightened round him. Being smaller than the others he was soon immobilized. Richard and Orkan battled against the sticky silk, but even more of it spurted out to trap them completely.

"Did you really think it was so easy to escape Baal?" the spider screeched, looming over them.

Still struggling against the sticky strands, Richard saw a movement behind Baal. It was Merkat, delicately padding his way out of the trees. He had circled round and was about to attack. As Richard watched, Merkat swung back his sword.

"Hey! Baal!" Richard shouted to distract the spider.



As Baal's eyes swivelled and looked down towards Richard, Merkat struck. His sword sank deep into Baal's bloated body, and a gush of reeking thick blood belched on to his arm. The spider gave a howl of agony and its hind legs buckled. Then Merkat sprang on to Baal's back and gripping his sword in both hands, he plunged it repeatedly through the spider's hairy hide. The same sickly fluid slopped from each cut.

Battle to the death

Baal was tough. Like Merkat, he was a survivor. He tucked in his legs to make a ball, and rolled over. Merkat jumped clear to avoid being crushed. Then Baal's legs sprouted and the spider jumped round to face his adversary. Merkat found himself backed on to a wall of sticky web.

Meanwhile, Orkan had managed to get at his knife and had cut through the silk to release his arms. It took him only a few seconds more to cut himself free. Then he was slashing at the bonds which held Richard and Melek. For a second all three stood in confusion, uncertain whether to run or to help Merkat. Then they headed towards the battling pair.

Seeing their intention, Merkat shouted from behind Baal's bulk. "Get away! Save yourselves. I'll take my chances!"

Orkan waved his hand in frustrated acknowledgement and turned to go. Richard was stunned.

"We can't just leave him!"

"Yes we can," Orkan replied. "First rule of war – don't waste lives. Remember that. Now do as he says. Go!" He grabbed Richard by the shoulders, spun him round and gave him a shove in the back. "Go!" he repeated. Then he gave Melek the same treatment. As the others ran Orkan turned to Merkat for the last time. There was a questioning expression on his face.

"Run!" Merkat shouted. "If you don't you'll waste everything. I can look after myself."

A HORRIBLE DEATH

As Merkat said these words his attention faltered and Baal pounced. The spider's yellow pincers sank deep into Merkat's chest. The leopardman coughed horribly, blood gushed from his mouth, and then his body went limp. Orkan watched in despair as Baal began to devour his victim. Then he ran as fast as he could after Richard and Melek.

Baal had almost finished eating Merkat before he realized the others had escaped. He gave a shrill whistle of fury. Then the whistle took on a higher, more piercing tone, one that rose and fell in a regular rhythm.

The sound carried to Richard, Melek and Orkan, as they plunged blindly through the forest. Deep in the trees, another creature was also roused by the high-pitched signal.

The serpent stirs

Lotan's body stirred automatically but his brain, still deep in slumber, was sluggish. It took him a while to come fully awake. Then he knew what he must do. His master had called, and he must obey. He must find and destroy those who had thwarted his master's will. His narrow, black tongue forked over his scaly lips. His coils twitched. Then he slid through the trees with deadly purpose, a seemingly never-ending length of viper with one thought on his mind – to do Baal's bidding as he had done many times before.

Lotan eased himself sinuously along the forest floor. He could smell his prey's terror. He could sense their indecision. This would be easy work. He increased his speed, fallen twigs crackling beneath the weight of his thick body.

It was Melek who first heard Lotan's approach. "What's that?" he called.

Richard and Orkan came to a halt. They were in a wide clearing. Over the sound of

their breathing they too heard the menacing, continuous slither. Before Richard could speak, the bushes parted in front of him and Lotan's head reared up, propelled by the impetus of his sudden dash. Behind him, his body thudded into hundreds of neat coils.

"Split up!" Richard shouted. "He can't chase all of us at once."

Even as Richard turned to run, he found himself enveloped in thick, rubbery coils. He called for help.

Orkan and Melek skidded to a halt. "We've got to help him," Orkan said. "But how?"

"The riddle . . ." Melek panted, "yellow orbs."

"Of course!" Orkan exclaimed before Melek could finish. "Yellow orbs that hasten days. It must mean those berries Merkat warned us about. The only trouble is, we're nowhere near them."

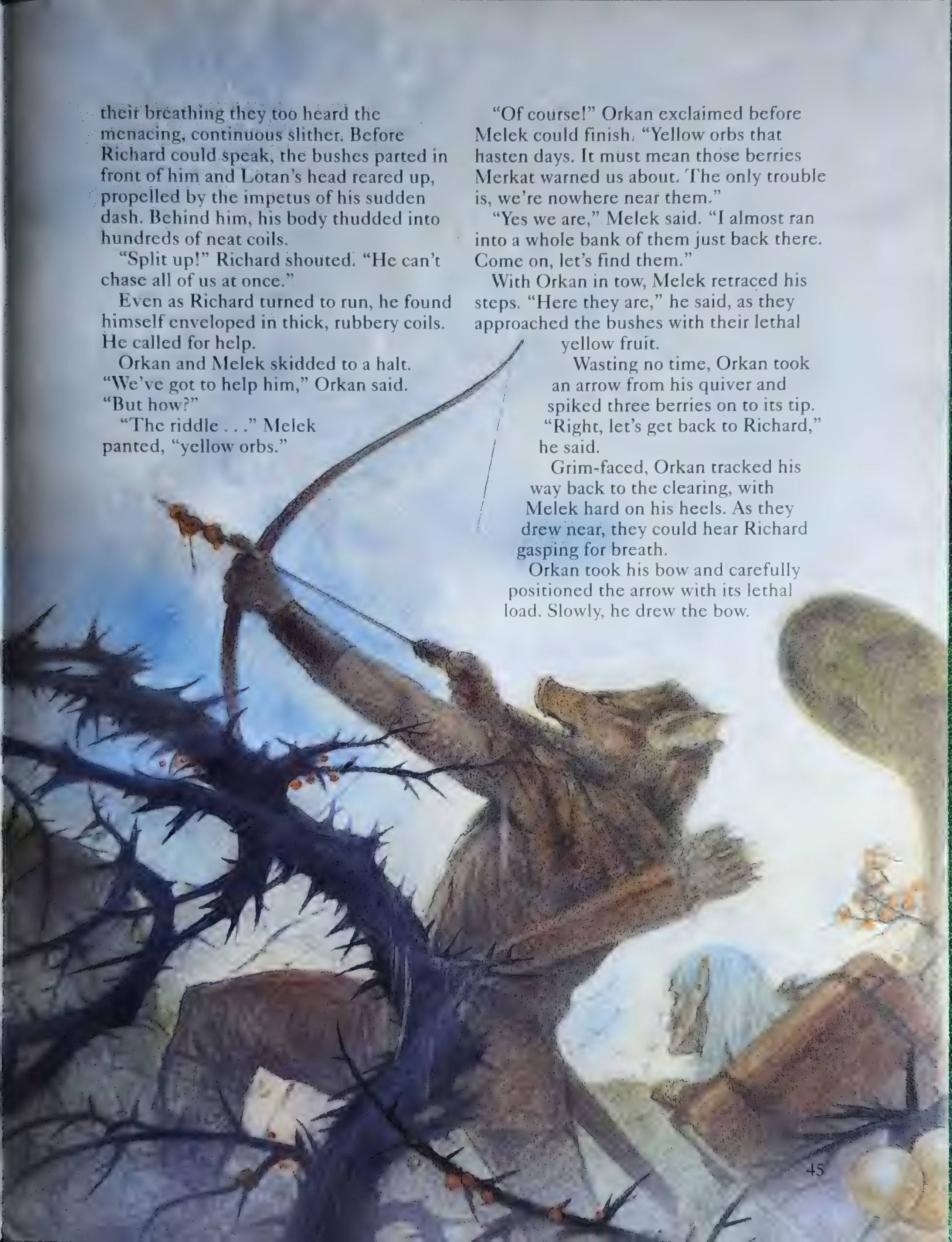
"Yes we are," Melek said. "I almost ran into a whole bank of them just back there. Come on, let's find them."

With Orkan in tow, Melek retraced his steps. "Here they are," he said, as they approached the bushes with their lethal yellow fruit.

Wasting no time, Orkan took an arrow from his quiver and spiked three berries on to its tip. "Right, let's get back to Richard," he said.

Grim-faced, Orkan tracked his way back to the clearing, with Melek hard on his heels. As they drew near, they could hear Richard gasping for breath.

Orkan took his bow and carefully positioned the arrow with its lethal load. Slowly, he drew the bow.



"Hey!" Orkan called to the snake.

In his barely conscious state Richard sensed rather than saw Lotan move in response. He could not know that his bag had opened and the precious pod had rolled out across the forest floor.

Melek and Orkan stood their ground nervously as Lotan recoiled. The thought of being swallowed whole by the serpent was in both their minds, but neither dared voice it aloud.

Lotan's downfall

Lotan reared up, dwarfing his two enemies into insignificance. He opened wide his cavernous mouth. At that moment Orkan fired. With deadly accuracy, the arrow flew into Lotan's throat. For a second, the snake remained motionless. Then he seemed to expand. Along the length of his body muscles swelled and rippled. His eyelids bulged and squirmed as the poison took effect. Then he went into spasm. His whole body thrashed in fury. Bushes were felled like matchsticks.

Orkan and Melek ran for cover, overawed by the power they had unleashed. Richard, meanwhile, lay semi-conscious on the ground as Lotan's tail slashed through the air above him.

Soon Lotan grew quiet and Orkan and

Melek emerged from hiding. They watched astonished as the snake's skin wrinkled into folds, his face bagged and fell in and his eyes spewed streams of red tears. As Lotan's rotting gums yawned helplessly, Melek and Orkan rushed over to Richard.

"Are you okay?" Orkan asked, hauling him to his feet.

"Just about," Richard whispered. He felt bruised and battered, but otherwise he was all right. Then he noticed his open bag. "Oh no! The pod's gone!"

The others looked at him aghast. Then Orkan gave a laugh of relief and pointed across the clearing. On the ground, not far from Lotan's twitching body, was the pod.

Richard walked towards it, keeping as far as he could from Lotan's carcass. He had almost reached the pod when he stopped, overcome by a feeling that he was being watched. He scanned the bushes and saw nothing. Then a thin voice came rasping from the darkness.

"You are a few paces from your treasure. So am I. Shall we see who can get there fastest?" It was Baal.

Richard thought desperately. Baal would almost certainly get there before him, but he had to have the pod.

Richard took a pace forward.

"So predictable," Baal jeered, "and soon you will be so dead!"

Shoomi's Sanctuary

Come into this ancient domain and use your powers of observation to find . . .

Shoomi and Shoobi

Look out for these friendly little creatures again. They are hiding somewhere in the illustrations in this issue.

In issue 2, Shoomi and Shoobi appeared on the inside front cover and page 30!

Mask of Evil

3-Minute Challenge

Can you find three fragments of the Evil One's mask hidden in the illustrations in less than three minutes?
Keep a note of your time and try to better it in the next issue!

In issue 2, the fragments were on pages 21 and 32. Did you beat the challenge? If not try again this time!

Monsters and Magic

After you have enjoyed Tolosh of the Garoon, read about Gilikango and Rusalki on your cards from *Morbane's Book of Monsters and Magic*.
Which of these creatures do you think the Tolosh are based on?
Check your answer in the next issue.

In issue 1, Sumar the Moss Beast was based on Nya Nya.

The Ancestral Trail

Cut out the tokens and locator cards and keep them safe. More will be given at regular intervals. Details about the role-playing game and how to play it will appear in future issues.

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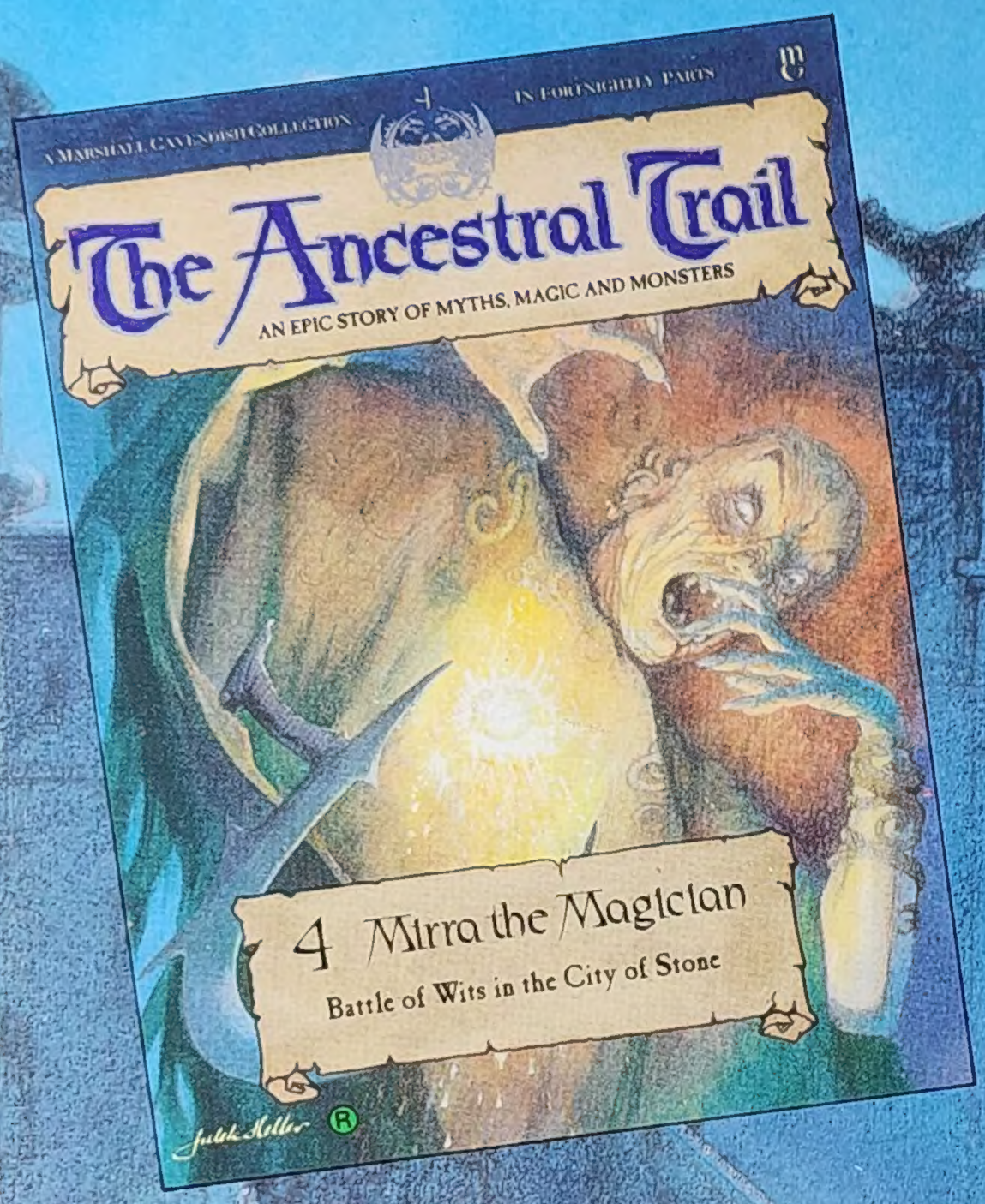
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4 Mirra the Magician
Battle of Wits in the City of Stone
Judith Moller ®

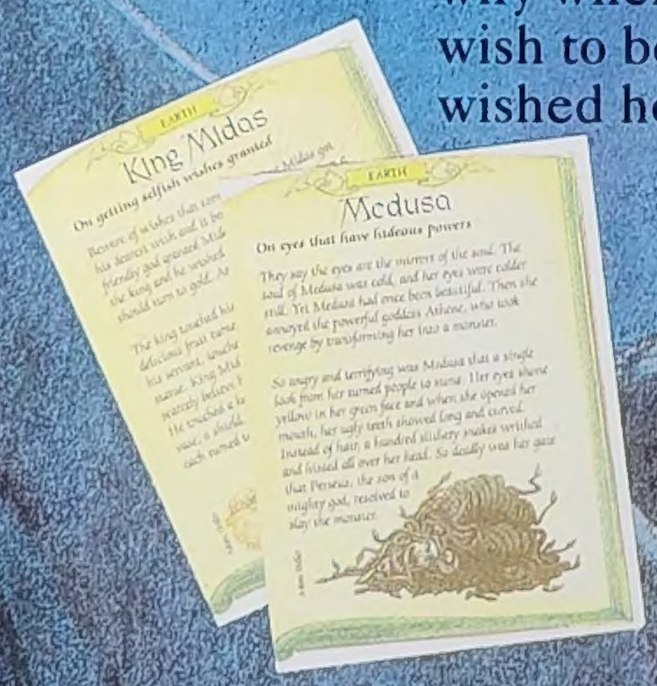
In Issue 4

Mirra the Magician

A Guardian has been turned to stone by the cunning Mirra. Can the trio outwit the evil magician to release the Guardian and escape from the City of Stone in one piece?

plus

- More tokens and locator cards for The Ancestral Trail role-playing game.
- Morbane's stories reveal how Perseus outwitted Medusa and why when King Midas got his wish to be rich, he then wished he hadn't.



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More pieces for the Ancestral World map • From Morbane – a bird that creates thunder and lightning and a bird who shoots brass wing feathers.

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